

Appropriations Committee

February 28, 2023

Public Hearing on H.B. 6659 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefor.

Good morning Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Erin Gasparini, I am the Chief Program Officer for Kuhn Employment Opportunities. We are an agency who receives funding from the Department of Developmental Services and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Our mission is to support individuals by providing day and employment services to those with Mental Illness and Intellectual Disabilities. We have been in business since 1962 and in that time we have seen so many participants reach their goals to obtain employment in the community, work as part of a group supported employment program which cleans many state facilities in CT, or improve their daily living and social skills allowing them to be more independent in their lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.B. 6659, the Governor's Budget. I am here to request that you increase funding for community nonprofits during the biennium by 9% in FY24, the first year, and 7% in FY25, the second year. This funding is crucial to honoring your long-term plan to increase funding for community nonprofits because it makes up for the high inflation nonprofits have experienced over the last two years.

The increases the legislature provided in the last biennium were deeply appreciated by nonprofits across the state, but providers of services for people with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities (I/DD) did not receive a Cost of Living Adjustment like the rest of the human services system.

Instead, for the last two years, we've received funds to meet the terms of a union settlement, which raised the minimum wage our programs are required to pay staff, but only provided two 3% raises to anyone making above the minimum wage and did not provide any increase in funding for any other program cost, many of which have increased dramatically due to inflation.

While we thank you for the increase to the minimum wage for our DDS front-line workers it continues to be challenging for us to afford the increases that we face due to inflation. Other for-profit industries can increase costs to their customers which ensures that they remain in business. Kuhn's costs have increased however Kuhn and other state funded businesses cannot charge more for services. The decisions that you have to make will impact our funding and the service system's survival. You cannot continue to ignore this impact.

In addition to our front-line staff who you recognized with increases, we have many other great staff who help Kuhn to run smoothly. Those staff include administrative workers who are responsible for paying bills, paying our staff and participant workers, inputting attendance,

hiring new staff, and providing training; maintenance positions who have to provide repairs for our aging building; management support tasked with training and oversight to provide quality supports for our participants. The past year's increase only to workers earning below the new legislatively mandated minimum wage is an oversight as it fails to consider the staff who provide important work to keep Kuhn running but were not able to benefit from the same percentage wage increase. To prevent compression and maintain staff morale, Kuhn had to look to find ways to increase wages for all staff. This furthered the negative financial impact as this was all unfunded and led to positions being streamlined or eliminated increasing the work load for our dedicated staff.

I am responsible for hiring many of the direct line staff and management support at Kuhn. We frequently are losing qualified applicants to other companies that can pay higher wages. In the past six months we have spoken with 157 candidates looking to work in our DDS funded programs in those positions that you increased the minimum wage for. Of these applicants Kuhn made job offers to only 7 of those people. Of those 7 people only 2 actually started with us. The other candidates did not clear the necessary requirement in our background check process. You may wonder what happened with the other 150 people who took the time to apply for positions, talk with our HR department, and schedule interviews with us? 66 or 44% of them were considered a no call/no show. Meaning they did not even call to cancel their scheduled interview. The rest either did not show up for the second interview, did not have the basic qualifications for the job, or decided that they were not interested in the position. We have seen no change in our hiring success resulting from the increased minimum wage for our positions. It is actually even harder as we are now competing with the state of CT's very moving and well-funded PR recruitment campaign that attracts new staff to highly paid positions with the state. This is another area we just can not compete as we have had to trim our budget to take on added expenses due to inflation and adjust wages to our hard-working staff, who the state did not identify as necessary of a wage increase or cost of living adjustment.

Direct care staff are expected to assist participants with their daily care needs and are coaching those with disabilities to become strong workers who will one day fill the very important positions in our communities. Those individuals who have been identified by the state as the most in need of care are often being cancelled because of staffing shortages. They are assigned to work with temporary employees who are now providing them with support that can be very personal and private for someone, and now is being provided by someone unfamiliar to them. We must do better, but without support and increased funding we are unable to attract quality candidates into this field. The committed staff at Kuhn are being overworked. Many have one or two other jobs to get by. Their commitment to the participants that they work with is strong, but they are reaching a breaking point. We will lose them to other higher paid positions. It is not ok. We must do better.

As the legislature considers proposals this year to reduce the waiting lists for DDS services, please understand that the system also needs funds to stabilize and maintain the existing

services. We cannot expand our reach into new programs and stand-up new services if our existing programs are understaffed and losing money.

I receive new referrals every day for people who are looking for new employment and day programs. These individuals are being referred to us as they are graduating from post graduate programs in their school system, or are leaving a program that has recently closed at another nonprofit provider, or are looking for a program that can offer them more training to help them find employment. I have to turn them all away as I do not have the staff to support them. We are always looking for more Group Supported Employment positions, and they do exist, but we have had to walk away from jobs not because we don't have the participants but because we don't have staff to hire to support them.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my perspective on the budget. Please support increasing funding for community nonprofits by 9% in FY24 and 7% in FY25.

Thank you for your time.

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